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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000823

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER PINS IZ
SUBJECT: PRT ANBAR: EMBASSY KABUL DCM DISCUSSES AWAKENING
MOVEMENT WITH SAI'S SHEIKH AHMAD ABU RISHA

Classified By: PRT Anbar Team Leader Jim Soriano
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) This is a PRT Anbar Reporting Cable.

¶2. (C) Summary: On March 12, Embassy Kabul DCM, Ambassador Chris Dell, met with Sheikh Ahmad, the leader of the tribal-based anti-Al Qaeda Awakening Movement of Iraq (SAI), to discuss the origins and success of SAI and what lessons could potentially be applied to Afghanistan. Ahmad described the population's transformation of perception toward Coalition Forces (CF) from occupiers to a force for good. He also stressed the importance of tribal councils, saying these institutions need to be strengthened in Afghanistan. Ahmad described his organization's efforts to publicize the Coalition's good deeds through local media and mosques. He also highlighted efforts to mobilize young men to join the Iraqi Police. End Summary.

¶3. (C) Embassy Kabul DCM, Ambassador Chris Dell, met on March 12 with Sheikh Ahmad Abu Risha, leader of the tribal-based anti-Al Qaeda Awakening Movement of Iraq, or Sahawa al-Iraq (SAI), at the sheikh's Ramadi compound. Ambassador Dell and Sheikh Ahmad discussed the origins and success of SAI and what lessons could potentially be transferred to Afghanistan.

Germany, Japan, and Vietnam

¶4. (C) Ahmad described what he called a transformation in popular perceptions of Coalition Forces in Anbar Province. Many initially saw the CF as occupiers who had upset the Sunnis, favored position in Iraq. However, Al Qaeda's brutality toward the local population helped bring about the realization that Coalition Forces were needed to combat the terrorism being perpetrated against locals. According to Ahmad, the key point came when his late brother, Sheikh Sattar Abu Risha, declared that Coalition Forces were friendly. Befriending the U.S. is the best policy for Iraq, he said. He added that U.S. occupation is not necessarily a bad thing. The U.S. occupied Japan and Germany at the end of World War II, and now U.S. consumers are buying German and Japanese goods, boosting their respective economies. He added that Vietnam resisted U.S. occupation, and Vietnam remains a relatively poor country. "We have to establish an economic relationship with the United States," he said. "No country in the world can prosper without a good relationship with the U.S."

Tribal Councils

¶5. (C) Ahmad stressed to Ambassador Dell the importance of tribal councils. In Anbar, tribal councils have helped build consensus on a common strategy and have played an important role in providing security. Similar institutions need to be strengthened in Afghanistan, he said.

¶6. (C) Ahmad described SAI's efforts to inform the local population that the Coalition was a force for good. He noted one case where Coalition Forces had rendered medical assistance to a local child. SAI officials made sure to publicize the case, distributing photographs to locals. SAI also publicized how Coalition Forces were helping to build hospitals and roads. Sheikh Ahmad stressed the need to promote a pro-Coalition message in the mosques. Imams speak to hundreds of people every week, and their influence and standing in the community is vital to delivering a pro-Coalition message to Iraqi citizens. He said SAI was active in organizing meetings between Imams and Coalition Forces. "Al Qaeda claimed that they were defending Iraq, but what we did was show the truth," Ahmad said. "They showed their real face and we helped show the real face of the Americans."

Mobilizing the Youth

¶7. (C) Another important factor to SAI's success was its ability to mobilize young men to join the Iraqi Police (IP) force. Once it was established that it was acceptable to work with Coalition Forces and U.S.-backed authorities, local tribes made a serious effort to convince their young men to join the local IP force. It became a matter of honor and duty, Ahmad said. His late brother and founding leader of SAI, Sattar, visited many police units in an effort to encourage them. He noted that many police worked for months without being paid.

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¶8. (C) Ahmad offered to draft a report detailing how SAI developed and succeeded to play a major role in marginalizing Al Qaeda in Anbar province.

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